

## “When Peewee Was King”

by Corrine Ardoin

When I was a kid, we lived in a cracker box. I know that's what it was, because my dad said so. It was in a neighborhood with all sorts of people, their kids running in the streets, whistling, playing ball, digging in each other's trash cans on trash day, and making playhouses out of large, cardboard boxes. Our house was white with faded black trim and it looked so big when I was a child and it had so many places to hide and to play and to run, but it was just a house like all the others being built in Southern California by the hundreds. In the 1950's and 1960's, everyone wanted a house like our's, nestled neatly in the quiet and safe suburbs away from the noise and gritty streets of the city. Women dreamed of their own appliances, clean walls, a new smell rather than the worn-down flavor of things.

Their dreams were filled with hopes of what they knew not of, but that a far-off vision fueled: a green lawn, a backyard barbecue, and everyone home safe. Their jobs were something to be proud of, for they paid for this life they dreamed, whether driving a bread truck or doing repair work, plumbing, teaching, or working at a dairy. It was all necessary and good.

What guided these dreams no one knows, but they fed on sweat and prayer, tears and bruises. I know, because my mother told me. She told me about the rundown roach havens, where babies were being born, and where dreams of a good job and a house in the suburbs travelled sweetly on crickets' song playing outside the screen door. Each time the day's haze subsided into a red, molten sunset, the women felt relieved, the unbearable temperatures might finally cool. The dogs would trot home after scavenging, the cats set out on evening forays along the tops of fences and walls, and the hum where someone stood working on their car engine,

would rise up louder and louder as they revved it, a work lamp hung, lighting the open hood.

Men gathered around, looking, listening, and it was serious business, men's work, where women only sat by to watch and to worry. They watched the men's faces for signs of concern or relief and they worried about both, because if there was cause to be concerned, there would be no way to get to work. If there was relief, their man would go to work and leave them alone within the cardboard-thin, auto court rental walls, where they would wait and worry some more.

It was in one of these auto courts, called Snowcap, where Peewee became king. He gained notoriety around the neighborhood, particularly amongst the most unsavory characters, and often needed to be sprung out of jail, as a result. A sociable, nondescript sort of little black dog, his worst behavior included peeing on a serviceman my father was kind enough to lend a ride home to. Peewee was so happy to stand in his lap, taking an ear-flapping sniff of the breeze going by along the road, while whizzing away on the poor serviceman's lap, to my mother and father's horror. The next time Peewee landed in jail, they never went to post bail on him. When Peewee was king, life was good, but when he fell from glory and his wayward ways got the better of him, he was just another dog pound reject.

Children had their own dreams. I know I did. Cardboard boxes became houses and airplanes. Pathways and sidewalks turned into roads and airstrips, and things like wagons and bicycles became the means to carry those dreams somewhere far off, even if it was only to a further part of the neighborhood where younger siblings were not allowed to venture. Their dreams came wrapped in cheap packaging containing popsicles, candy bars, and cast off cigar boxes. The latter was useful for stowing tiny treasures like a decoder ring or other such useless junk ordered from an ad in the latest Superman or Dick Tracy comic book. Although, prizes like a mother's wedding ring or an especially valuable old coin, were of greater use than gathering

dust. They were profitable bargaining tools for a swift trade or more of what came in cheap packaging. Yet, those dreams contained the flavor of the day, cherry for something really special and chocolate for something worth savoring. If it had nuts, all the better, because what would life be without a few nuts with whom to share it?

Talk was big within those soon-to-be-flattened appliance boxes, talk of marriage and children and what's-for-dinner-tonight? But, in those childish conversations, dreams were nurtured upon the distant drone of a lone aircraft passing overhead. A quiet, sunny spot in one's room was perfect. Older siblings would never know what their pestering little brother or sister were thinking when hiding in a closet, door open just enough for the sun's rays to warm the carpet, whilst digging through big sister's purse for what might be good to eat or good to play with. Dressers, so tall to wee ones, would one day shrink in stature and bunkbeds that once were ships aloft on high seas would surely become miniaturized by the years. What kept us going? Not the tons of sugar we ate nor the blow bubbles we certainly swallowed with every puff through the magic wand, but something indefinable, something unfathomable to those who feared dreaming at all. With one careless shove down the hill, a child seated in an old, black baby buggy could imagine that hill, a mountain. The tiny, rickety wheels rattling beneath their craft could take them airborne or, at the very least, sailing into other dreams, dreams that came upon skinned knees and scraped elbows, dreams that flew before the ship set sail and long after one's mother said, "Dinner's ready!"

A wagon was an indispensable mode of transportation, especially for families with lots of children, which was nearly every one of those families. Placing one knee in the wagon, holding onto the handle, a kid could propel themselves along, until siblings and wandering children climbed aboard for a ride and the whole thing toppled over, crashing onto the pavement. Mostly,

it was a hauling device, hauling children, hauling groceries, hauling junk dug from other people's trash cans, hauling newspapers, and so forth and so on.

When Peewee was king, life was simple. Fathers wore goofy hats and pink shirts. Mothers wore sweet smiles and clothes they made themselves. Couples argued on the nights all the windows needed to be open, and steak and potatoes fueled the days to come. No more would they suffer. No more would they do without, for their man found a job and the car was fixed and the women were relieved, sitting on the doorstep waiting for the cool to come drifting in, feeling the heat rise from the cracked and crumbled blacktop where Peewee once ruled supreme.